

An Unattainable Elsewhere: The Body, the Archive, & the Forcibly Displaced

A “Data Storytelling” Presentation by danielle luz belanger

December 8, 2020

This presentation concerns the role of archivists in combating displacement-- particularly, U.S.-based archivists working at state or federal institutions. Before we can engage this topic, we need to first establish an understanding of how archival systems were built to serve existing structures of power.

To illustrate this point, I invite you to consider for a moment the origins of passport photographs. It is no coincidence that identification photographs were formalized as official U.S. documents during the late nineteenth century, in an era that saw an influx of asian migrants; these documents were instated to validate and legitimize the movement of bodies and were conceived of as a way to affirm the citizenship of a select few by establishing the status of the Other, or the noncitizen. The novel passport photograph was meant to be a mechanism of bureaucratic control, yet as Thy Phu shows us, the “very rigidity of its regulations ironically betrays an anxiety about the representation of citizenship, suggesting perhaps that the state cannot wholly recognize its citizens... [This] attests not to the state’s efficiency when it comes to identifying citizens and noncitizens, but rather, its inefficiency.”

The contradictions pointed out by Thy Phu prompt us to ask: can citizenship really be discerned through regulated pieces of information? State archives rely on standardization to effectively operate, yet they teem with discrepancies. Statelessness and refugeeism emerge as one such discrepancy; they undermine the efficacy and authority of official documents by exposing their incapacity to serve the needs of the disempowered.

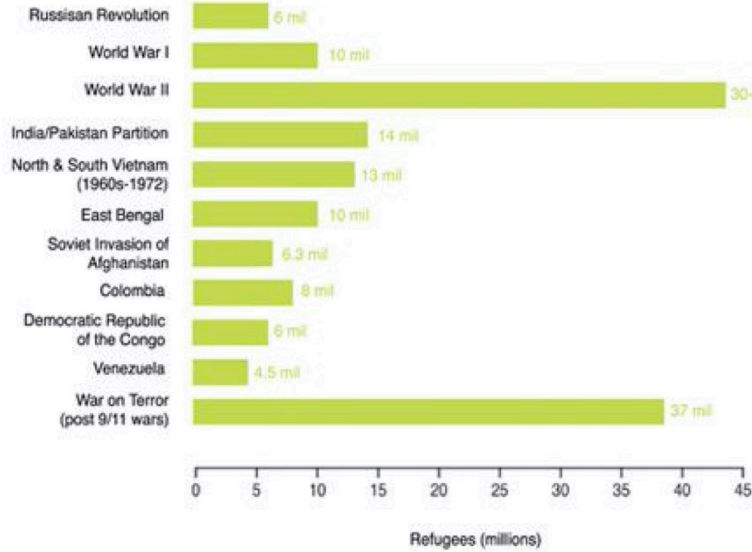
We can see then how displacement, which produces the condition of refugeeism, challenges the regulatory compulsion of standard record-keeping practices by introducing irregularity into a system that relies upon regularity to properly function.

It was recently discovered that displacement is an escalating crisis as a result of the U.S. war on terror, which is now approaching its tenth year. To explore how archivists may make a meaningful intervention in the crisis of displacement, we need to first turn to examine the impacts of war on the forcibly displaced.

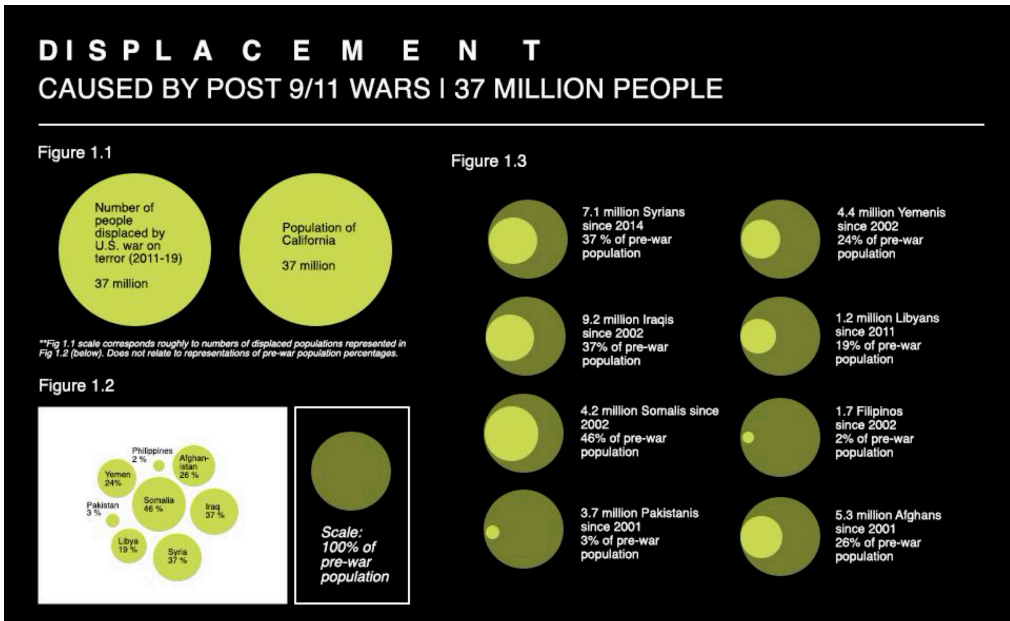
The Forcibly Displaced: 37 Million Reasons to End War

As it stands, the United States’ war on terror has displaced an estimated 37 million people. To put the number in context, that’s the equivalent of the population of California. This is a conservative estimate. Experts suggest that the real number could be as high as 52 million, which would be the equivalent of the population of California

and Illinois combined. These recent findings reveal several compelling points. For one, we are living in an era marked by a level of violence which has only been paralleled by World War II.



And, as a result of this violence, national populations are rapidly dwindling. In about half of the eight countries analyzed, nearly 50% of the prewar population has been displaced. We can start to imagine what that might be like: If you lived in Iraq, Somalia or Syria, of every ten people you know, approximately four would be displaced.



Though this is an abbreviated description of the current situation, the data alone speaks volumes. The question is, are we listening? And if we are, what are we, as archivists, going to do about it?

Stewarding Futures: The Archival Problem

Having the necessary documentation to cross borders can literally be a life or death matter. Which is why archives and other recordkeeping offices who work with official government and bureaucratic records figure prominently in refugee and migrant crises. But, as Anne Gilliland shows us, official archives are not “structurally oriented to address the immediate needs of the forcibly displaced and other ‘non-citizens’ who often resort to ‘irregular’ forms and uses of records survive.”

The documentation required in different jurisdictions or settlements can vary considerably, and “the number and types of documents a refugee might bring with them... or be expected to produce, multiplies with passage through different countries and statuses.” Since the majority of records in national and government archives conform to state or nation-specific standards, they are not readily transferable between state lines. This transnational and transinstitutional condition is revealing of the challenges that archivists are confronted with when attempting to support displaced populations. What this tells us, is that we need better mechanisms in place to support working across institutions and borders.

Because the U.S. is responsible for causing such high levels of displacement across the globe, I would argue that U.S.-based archivists should be the ones to initiate the conversations and provide the infrastructures necessary to begin addressing this problem--to help set the foundation for a global collaborative network of archivists committed to combating displacement. We should become familiarized with the archival systems of countries most impacted by the U.S. war on terror and work with those countries to facilitate a process that will enable easier access to required documentation.

The solution I’m proposing may seem counterintuitive to more policy-driven archivists, who may believe that a more obvious or straightforward method of supporting displaced populations would be to reform protocols around required documents, making it easier for refugees to be admitted into the U.S. While I’m not opposed to this idea, I do want to push back against it a little bit. Because when we suggest that U.S. admission is the best solution to what is a global and largely third world crisis, we not only promote U.S. exceptionalism, but we also diminish the magnitude of what numbers here represent: dispossession, destruction, and loss.

Contrary to common assumptions, not everyone yearns for a U.S. passport, but many people yearn for home. As archivists, we must embrace the understanding that we may never be able to fully reconcile, or even begin to grasp, the extent of what has been taken from those displaced. We should be framing our work in recognition of this fact, and hone our ability to help displaced people return to or re-create home--on their own terms.

This means that our initiatives should not be pursued with the ultimate goal of streamlining admission of affected populations into the U.S. Instead, our aim should be to support the self-preservation and self-determination of affected populations more

generally--to help provide forcibly displaced people with agency and choice. To paraphrase Anne Gilliland, archives cannot merely serve the interests of law, official bureaucracy, or the state; they must also be tools of the people. And that includes citizen and non-citizen alike.

Conclusion

I opened this conversation discussing the official documents used to verify citizenship to encourage the question: what makes a citizen? Because in order to be prepared as archivists to recognize the different interests that displaced people have in the creation, preservation, and accessibility of official records, we have to first problematize and unsettle preconceived notions of citizenship. Only then can we begin to enact a more holistic approach to archiving, one in which people are prioritized over structures of power; where thoughtfulness, rather than protocol, guide our work.

The “unattainable elsewhere” of this conversation’s title is two-pronged. It refers to the situation of the forcibly displaced in that experiences of displacement often involve a longing for a place that no longer exists.

It also refers to the “unattainable elsewhere” that we archivists are faced with: the impossible “elsewhere” that could be likened to the inevitably failed outcome of attempting to dismantle the master’s house with his own tools. And yet, it is these imagined “elsewheres” that motivate our work, that expose, in the words of Howard Zinn, the “inevitably political craft” of archiving; these are the elsewheres that compel us toward justice in a system that privileges precedent over possibility. And I believe that this, ultimately, is the task of the archivist in the struggle against displacement: to make, by whatever means necessary, the unattainable elsewhere more attainable.

References

Gilliland, Anne J. "A Matter of Life and Death: A Critical Examination of the Role of Official Records and Archives in Supporting the Agency of the Forcibly Displaced," in "Critical Archival Studies," eds. Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand. Special Issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017).

Ismay, John. "At Least 37 Million People Have Been Displaced by America's War on Terror," *The New York Times* (September 8, 2020).

Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House," (1984).

Phu, Thy. "Spectacles of Intimacy and the Aesthetics of Domestication," in *Picturing Model Citizens* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012).

Sekula, Alan. "The Body and the Archive" in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, (1989): 342-388.

Vine, David. "US-led wars have displaced 37m people. America should accept responsibility," *The Guardian* (September 18, 2020).

Vine, D., Coffman, C., Khoury, K., Lovasz, M., Bush, H., Leduc, R., & Walkup, J. "Creating Refugees: Displacement Caused by the United States' Post-9/11 Wars," *The Costs of War Project*, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs (2020).

Zinn, Howard. "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," *Boston University Journal*., v.19-21, 1971.